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ABSTRACT

The topic of mixed-age groups in early childhood education is discussed in terms of: (1) advantages of mixed-age classes; (2) social development in mixed-age groups; (3) cognitive development in mixed-age groups; and (4) implications for early childhood education. It is asserted that mixed-age interaction among young children can offer a variety of developmental benefits to all participants. Empirical data on the educational principles that should guide instruction in mixed-age environments are not yet available; however, when available, such data are likely to support the position that mixed-age group interaction can have unique adaptive, facilitating, and enriching effects on children's development. Nine references are cited for further reading. (RH)

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ERIC Digest

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Mixed-Age Groups in Early Childhood Education

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The practice of educating children in mixed-age groups in early childhood education, including the primary grades, has a long history. Mixed-age grouping has also been known as *heterogeneous, multi-age, vertical, ungraded* or *nongraded*, and *family grouping*. Cross-age tutoring is another method of altering traditional ways of grouping children in their early years.

If current trends in maternal employment continue, increasing numbers of young children will spend larger proportions of their preschool years in care outside of their homes (Katz, 1988). Young children who are cared for at home are unlikely to spend large amounts of time in groups of children of the same age. Natural family units are typically heterogeneous in age. The family group provides all members with the opportunity to observe, emulate and initiate a wide range of competencies.

It is assumed that the wider the range of competencies manifested in a mixed-age group, the greater the opportunities for group members to develop relationships and friendships with others who match, complement, or supplement the participants' own needs and styles. The greater diversity of maturity and competence present in a mixed-age group, as compared to a same-age group, provides a sufficient number of models to allow most participants to identify models suitable for their learning.

Given that spontaneously formed peer groups are typically heterogeneous in composition, the separation of children into same-age groups in early childhood education settings is questionable. This grouping practice is based on the assumption that chronological age is the single most reliable developmental index. This assumption has led to the extensive screening and testing related to kindergarten entrance. But developmental indexes other than chronological age—indexes such as social, emotional, and cognitive level of maturity—can be used.

Advantages of Mixed-Age Classes

In mixed-age classes, it may be easier for kindergarten and preschool teachers to resist the "push-down" tendency—the trend to introduce the primary school curriculum into kindergarten and preschool classes (Gallagher & Coche, 1987). Because mixed-age grouping invites cooperation and other prosocial behaviors, the discipline problems of competitive environments can often be minimized.

A mixture of ages within a class can be particularly desirable for children functioning below age group norms in some areas of their development. These children may find it less stressful to interact with younger peers than with same-age peers. Such interactions can enhance younger children's motivation and self-confidence.

Social Development in Mixed-Age Groups

Prosocial behaviors are often treated as indices of social development. Prosocial behaviors such as help-giving, sharing, and turn-taking facilitate interaction and promote socialization. Social perceptions also play an important role in the development of social competence. They are an essential part of a child's increasing social awareness. The formation of friendships is often based on a child's perceptions of the roles of peers in a variety of social contexts.

Research evidence suggests that children of different ages are usually aware of differences and attributes associated with age. Consequently, both younger and older children in mixed-age groups differentiate their expectations depending on the ages of the participants. Interaction in mixed-age groups elicits prosocial behaviors that are important in the social development of the young child.

A number of studies indicate that mixed-age grouping can provide remedial benefits for at-risk children. For example, it has been established that children are more likely to exhibit prosocial behaviors (Whiting, 1983) and offer instruction (Ludeke & Hartup, 1983) to younger peers than to age-mates. Children are also more likely to establish friendships (Hartup, 1976) and exhibit aggression with age-mates, and to display dependency with older children. The availability of younger and therefore less threatening peers in mixed-age groups offers the possibility of remedial effects for children whose social development is at risk.

Cognitive Development in Mixed-age Groups

Research suggests that the effect of mixed-age grouping on cognition is likely to derive from the cognitive conflict arising from children's interaction with peers of different levels of cognitive maturity. In their discussion of cognitive conflict, Brown and Palinscar (1986) make the point that the contribution of such cognitive conflict to learning is not simply that the less-informed child imitates the more knowledgeable one. The interaction between the children leads the less-informed member to internalize new understandings.

Along the same lines, Vygotsky (1978) maintains that the internalization of new understandings, or *cognitive restructuring*, occurs when concepts are actually transformed and not merely replicated. According to Vygotsky, internalization takes place when children interact within the "zone of proximal development." Vygotsky (1978) defines this zone as "the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (p.86).

Slavin (1987) suggests that in terms of the Vygotskian concept of the "zone of proximal development," the discrepancy between what an individual can do with and without assistance can be the basis for cooperative peer efforts that result in cognitive gains. In Slavin's view, "collaborative activity among children promotes growth because children of similar ages are likely to be operating within one another's zones of proximal development, modeling in the collaborating group behaviors more advanced than those they could perform as individuals" (p. 1162). Brown and Reeve (1985) maintain that instruction aimed at a wide range of abilities allows the novice to learn at his own rate and to manage various cognitive challenges in the presence of "experts."

Implications for Early Childhood Education

Mixed-age interaction among young children can offer a variety of developmental benefits to all participants. However, this is not to suggest that merely mixing children of different ages in a group will guarantee that the benefits mentioned earlier will be realized. Before grouping, one must consider the optimum age range, the proportion of older to younger children, the allocation of time to the mixed-age group and the curriculum and teaching strategies that will maximize the educational benefits for the group. The empirical data on the educational principles that should guide instruction in mixed-age environments are not yet available. When the data become available, they should support the position that mixed-age group interaction can have unique adaptive, facilitating and enriching effects on children's development.

For More Information

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